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Visions of Family Meals in Japanese Cinema

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Abstract Cooking and dining scenes have been a ubiquitous presence in Japanese cinema since its inception, and the relationship between Japanese people and food has been frequently exploited to play out family dynamics, rites of passage, etc. Therefore, the dining room often becomes the place where drama unfolds in striking contrast with this supposedly safe environment. This paper focuses on three films where dining scenes are particularly relevant – Ozu Yasujiro's *The Flavor of Green Tea Over Rice* (1952), Morita Yoshimitsu's *The Family Game* (1983) and Miike Takashi's *Visitor Q* (2001) – in order to analyse how Japanese cinema has documented the transformation of family relations in time.

Keywords Ozu Yasujiro. Morita Yoshimitsu. Miike Takashi. Traditional family. Dining scenes.

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1 Introduction

Japanese movies featuring dining scenes are countless since for many East Asian countries meals are regarded as a moment of socialisation, a break from daily life, or associated with traditional rites, such as eating *mochi* on New Year's Eve. Although street food is a far more common practice in Japan than in European countries, the house continues to be the main place to consume food. Japanese cinema often exploits the relationship between food and tradition to represent fam-

ily dynamics, therefore a history of the Japanese family can be appreciated through the lens of movies. Kitchens and dining rooms are often the places where drama unfolds, creating a striking contrast with the seemingly safe environment. In this paper, I will analyse the dining scenes of three films and their relation to the development of the traditional family. I will focus on the representation of a marriage crisis in the 1950s in Ozu Yasujirō's *Ochazuke no aji* (*The Flavor of Green Tea Over Rice*, 1952), the exploration of a middle-class family during the high-growth period of the 1980s in Morita Yoshimitsu's *Kazoku gēmu* (*The Family Game*, 1983), and the disintegration of the nuclear family in the New Millennium in Miike Takashi's *Bijitā Q* (*Visitor Q*, 2001). Although these movies vary greatly in terms of style, tone and characteristics, the comparison between them will highlight the differences running through the decades and the problematic aspects of the traditional family in their own temporal contexts.

2 *The Flavor of Green Tea Over Rice*

The Flavor of Green Tea Over Rice differs from Ozu's style of direction in both tone and the choice of characters. The gloomy script is counterbalanced by an unusually light touch and the story does not feature an old father abandoned by his daughters, nor sons visiting their ageing parents, but, instead, a dissatisfied wife, an uncommon character in Ozu's filmography (Bock 1980, 78). This is something Donald Richie links to Ozu's wish to modernise an old screenplay he wrote during the War (along with his usual screenwriter Nodo Kōga). However, Richie found him lacking in the attempt to "graft new material onto old" (Richie 1974, 238). The protagonists are Taeko and Mokichi, a longtime couple with no children, brought together by an arranged marriage, and trapped in a mid-life crisis given they are people with very different interests. The main subplot focuses on their niece Setsuko, her rejection of an arranged marriage like theirs and a possible sentimental *liaison* with the husband's *protégée*.

As the title openly suggests, food is symbolically meaningful in the story: *ochazuke* is a simple and traditional dish, where green tea is poured onto white rice with or without seasoning. Three scenes connected with food and meals mark the main turning points of the story and represent the symbolical development of the couple's relationship. In the first part of the film, the two are seldom seen together, emphasising the differences in their lives and a sense of detachment in spite of their marriage. The first dining scene features Taeko, the wife, taking a break from life in the city and enjoying a spa resort with two friends and her niece Setsuko. While eating and drinking in a beautiful *ryōkan* in their matching kimonos, the women talk about their husbands' flaws and Taeko is the most cynical amongst them.

Their criticism extends to naming carp in the pond below their room after their husbands, and once again it is Taeko who enjoys the joke the most since she names the one 'resembling' her husband *donkan san* (Mr. Thickhead), because the carp is not able to catch any of the food she throws at him. If this scene is useful in describing their current situation, the next one documents one of the biggest arguments between the couple, marking a further break in their relationship. This happens when Taeko sees her husband pouring his soup onto the rice and sipping it noisily. Mokichi loves this practice but so far has restrained himself from doing it in front of his sophisticated wife. His accidental slip shocks her and drives her away from the room in anger. The next day she boards the train to Osaka without notifying her husband. Ozu suggests that in an arranged marriage one does not really know the partner, in spite of the length of their matrimony. Later on, the dining table becomes the place where the couple finds happiness together for the first time and the *ochazuke* turns out to be the perfect dish to restore their relationship. This scene is preceded by a long one set in the kitchen, where the couple searches for the ingredients for the dish. Their confusion about the location of the ingredients mimics their lack of knowledge of one another but this time, the tone is joyful and the couple shares a new intimacy. *Ochazuke* becomes the symbol of their renewed relationship: while they share it on the traditional dinner table, Taeko realises that a simple and modest dish like the *ochazuke* can be as fulfilling as marriage to an unsophisticated man.

In *The Flavor of Green Tea Over Rice*, Ozu gives the audience a realistic representation of everyday life in post-war Japan, analysing how the institution of arranged marriage faced society of the 1950s. Yet, criticism of this institution does not come directly from the couple but from the niece, as she refuses to conform to outdated rules in order to avoid being trapped in a life of unhappiness like her uncle. Setsuko also represents the type of impact that modernity and Westernisation had in Japan and particularly on women, since her Western dresses contrast with her aunt's kimono. She then disrupts the highly hierarchical society by following her uncle to a *pachinko* parlour, a place traditionally reserved for men at that time. However, and perhaps because of her criticism, she is not portrayed kindly by the director but rather as a lunatic, stubborn and spoiled young woman and she keeps the same attitude when she starts dating a man of her choice.

If dining scenes are those that define the path of the wife-husband relationship, food emphasises the differences between the two protagonists conveyed through their culinary tastes: Mokichi likes simple and cheap food, while Taeko prefers sophisticated dishes. However, even considering the couple's happy ending, Ozu's reading of the post-war Japanese family is still problematic; in the end,

the 'blame' falls onto the woman since she is the one who has to conform to her husband's lifestyle to appreciate their relationship and the *ochazuke* itself.

3 The Family Game

Analysing films from different decades is useful to understand how economic developments affected not only what families ate, but also the manner and location of their meals. This is most evident in *The Family Game*, a rather free adaptation of Honma Yōmei's novel of the same title. The film is set in high-growth era Japan, when the private space of the family has shifted from the traditional houses of the 1950s to the *danchi* (lit. 'group land') of the 1980s. The Numatas, comprised of husband, wife and two teenage sons, live in one of these anonymous buildings. In Morita's vision, they represent the rigid roles that Japanese consumerist society assigned to them: the father is a *sarariman*-kind of person often absent from home, the mother is the housekeeper never leaving the house and caring about everything their sons need. The elder brother Shin'ichi is kind and study-oriented, while Shigeyuki is rebellious, at the bottom of his class rankings and bullied by his classmates. The dynamics of this apparently normal family are disrupted when a *katei kyōshi* (a private tutor) called Yoshimoto is hired to help Shigeyuki improve his grades to apply to a better high school. The film is a ruthless criticism of the "entrance exam war" and the Japanese educational system, but it is also "the unique mode of approach to the family" in "postmodern" Japan, an absurdist tale of the "middle-class nuclear family life in the city" (McDonald 1989, 55).

Spatiality in the movie plays an important role and it is one of the primary sources for comedy. The Numata's apartment is so small and claustrophobic that the couple has to go to the car to have private conversations, and the older brother can only access his room by walking through Shigeyuki's. In this house deprived of privacy, the dining table features as the central object. It is an unrealistic and un-traditional table, for it is extremely long and narrow, and all the family members line up on the same side, eating shoulder to shoulder. Although exceptionally long, the table does not provide enough space for the four of them to move freely, even less so when the tutor is invited for dinner, hence reinforcing the claustrophobic feeling of the house. Furthermore, the shots involving family meals are usually flat – much like in Leonardo's *The Last Supper* – and along with several elements such as, "the orientation of the table, the x-axis movement of the food-server, and the horizontal line up of diners", it contributes to "the image's precise, mechanical, frontal, flat

humour” (Davis 2006).¹ In Mita’s opinion, far from being an ‘un-realistic’ object, the dining table is an accurate signifier of Japanese society in the 1980s, when families usually watched television while eating, thus reflecting the fictionality of reality itself (Mita 1995, 28), and the resulting lack of communication.²

In this context, tutor Yoshimoto is the disruptive force that, violating social norms, exposes the dysfunctionalities of the family. Similar to Pasolini’s *Teorema* (1968), the outsider is able to bring to the fore contradictions inherent to the family, which were never openly addressed by its members. Although the tutor mostly works in Shigeyuki’s room, his disruptive power is most evident in the dining room, thus affecting the entire family. In fact, since it is the only shared space of the apartment, the dining table features some of the most relevant scenes in the film,³ such as the hilarious attacks on the nuclear family in their last dinner with the tutor, held to celebrate Shigeyuki’s accomplishment in entering a prestigious high school. It is a technically effective scene, a single eight-minute take where the situation degenerates into a food battle, further exacerbated by the little space the characters have. In one of the most memorable scenes in the history of Japanese cinema featuring a family meal, the tutor puts an end to the dinner by literally knocking out every single member of the family, overturning the table and then leaving the house. Yoshimoto has destroyed the Numatas’ sense of stability, and his character exposes the contradictions in the representation of the traditional family in Japanese cinema “wreaking havoc on generic expectations and overturning cinematic traditions” (Knee 1991, 40). Yoshimoto has torn off the mask of the family as a fake unit, where each member has to play out their pre-assigned role regardless of their real relationships. If in Ozu’s movie Taeko explicitly criticises her husband’s flaws in front of her friends and Mokichi talks frankly to the maid about his marriage problems, in *The Family Game* appearances are

1 Another feature of the dining scenes is the sense of incommunicability they exert to the audience since all the family members face the same direction and they are not able to look into each other’s eyes. This element clearly reflects the parents’ inability to understand their sons’ feelings, as everything the father seems to care about is to improve his son’s grades - even offering monetary prizes to the tutor - and the mother is too fond of them to even understand when they ridicule her, as in the first scene or in the ‘coffee joke’.

2 The layout of the dining table with the family lined up from side to side makes them look like products in a commodity catalogue, emphasising the consumerist era (Murakami 1984, 60-5). They are no longer real human beings, but archetypes defined by commodified objects, as it happens with the elder brother with his telescope and the mother with leatherwork.

3 In the opening scene, the characters are presented while sitting at the dining table and they are associated with a specific food. Shigeyuki introduces them first as a unit, then individually, labelling them as “noisy” (*sugoku urusai*) and “on the verge of a nervous breakdown” (*piripiri natte*).

all that matters and everything is accepted for the sake of the children's academic career or to seem as a normal, middle-class family. In 'postmodern' Japan, food and beverage thus become disposable commodities, something that can be thrown at people or spit in the sink, unlike the ingredients used to make the *ochazuke* that were so accurately organised and preserved in Ozu's movie. They are mere signs emptied of their inherent properties, whose only function is to stand for signifiers of characters, like the soymilk the father sips while being in the *ofuro*. In fact, when later in the movie the tutor asks for the same drink from the wife, he is declaring his position as the new head of the family (Gerow 2007, 244).

4 Visitor Q

If *The Family Game* parodies the family unit in postmodern Japan, then *Visitor Q* by Miike Takashi represents a post-postmodern society, one that has already lost all its signifiers, where parody has been replaced by nonsense and where what could be defined as a "traditional" family is already shuttered. It is one of those extreme movies that made Miike's eclecticism infamous. Shot entirely on digital video with a very limited budget, Miike was able to turn this limitation into a virtue, thanks to his background in the V-cinema industry and the "chameleon-like ability to adapt his filmmaking sensibilities to almost any kind of scenario" (Chris 2014, 189). It features the Yamazaki family and their inept father who is shooting a documentary about youth culture, and in the opening scene finds out his runaway daughter became a prostitute. When he tries to interview her, he is lured into having sexual intercourse with her. At home, his son, who suffers regular bullying from three classmates, takes his frustration out on the mother, beating her for futile reasons. The mother is addicted to heroin and sells her body to middle-aged men to afford her habit. In this disconcerting portrait, the father brings a bizarre stranger to live with them, which affects the entire family. As in *The Family Game*, it seems to be a variation based on Pasolini's *Teorema*, but this time the Visitor does not have the function to disrupt family's dynamics, on the contrary, he will provide - with no apparent reason, just like a divine force - the necessary inputs to 'wake up' the family and restore harmony in a rather peculiar way.

Visitor Q features several scenes in which characters are eating at the dining table, but they can hardly be called family meals, as the mere act of sitting together is the only action resembling a normal meal. They are war scenes instead, since they usually involve throwing knives, beatings, and assaults with fireworks. Family meals are just a gesture of what a 'traditional' family is supposed to do, even if there is no sense of family left. The woman diligently plays the role of

a submissive mother, serving the dishes with a smile moments after being beaten by her son, while the Visitor cheerfully asks for *okawari* and the father keeps eating. This absurdist behaviour is even more evident when the bullies destroy the house with their fireworks and everyone keeps eating unbothered, except for the father who is filming a new documentary about his son. The parents' attitude at dinner reflects the devotion to their family roles, which numbed them to their own feelings, losing track of each other and of their children. They are unable to communicate, as the only form of interest the father feels towards them is connected to his job, using the camera to observe his sons from a safe distance. It is therefore significant that the mother's awakening comes through food when the Visitor makes her rediscover femininity and maternal instincts by squeezing her breasts making her milk drip copiously. In a later scene, she is able to react to her son's beatings for the first time by throwing a knife close to him and then covering the kitchen floor with her milk. She later helps her husband kill the three bullies – the first activity they do together after years – while the son swims in her milk promising he will become a good student. The film ends with the mother breastfeeding the husband and the returning daughter, as “maternity covers all the contradictions by embracing them in herself” (Yomota in Tomasi 2006, 84). Even through extreme forms of expression, with characters embodying social phenomena of Japanese society, in the end *Visitor Q* reveals itself as a conservative movie at heart, as the unity of the traditional family is restored centring it on the woman's maternity.

5 Visions of Family Meals

In Ozu's film, the couple lives in a detached house with maids, keeps relationships with friends and colleagues, and is able to develop sociality. In contrast, the Japanese family of the 1980s becomes a mere number inside a beehive (the *danchi*), where nobody knows each other, as exemplified by Yoshimoto asking twice to neighbours where the Numatas live, without obtaining an answer. It is a seemingly inescapable place and the couple is never shown outside of the apartment, except for the car (its extension). In the 1980s the family is left alone, a nuclear unit isolated from – yet closer than ever to – other families. The only scene featuring direct contact with neighbours is an awkward, although hilarious, situation regarding a funeral, once again highlighting the ‘inhuman’ dimension of the *danchi*. The return to a traditional house in *Visitor Q* does not improve the family's condition, as the building is literally under attack from outside forces, represented by bullies. Except for a father's colleague, they are the only sort of distorted form of socialisation that the family has. Their presence is even more effective than in *The Family Game*, be-

cause their assaults tear down the house, spatially representing the dismantling of the 'traditional' family.

As family spatiality progressively changed through the decades, the same goes for paternal roles and their function. The mother in *Visitor Q* could be seen as the evolution of *The Family Game*'s one, as both are scolded or ignored by their husbands and both are treated like a servant or worse by their sons. Their existence is the most miserable among the members of the family and it is representative of women's condition in contemporary Japan (Morimoto 1994, 260-72). Nonetheless, the mother redeems herself at the end of *Visitor Q*, becoming the new centrepiece of the family. On the other hand, it is the husband/father figure that emerges as the weak one in the three movies. Even considering the rather positive characterisation of the husband in *The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice*, all three of them are symbols of failure. Mokichi fails in the most fundamental masculine duty in what is considered a traditional family: giving her wife a child. He is also extremely passive in accepting his marriage conditions, hardly understanding his wife's feelings. The Numata's father is mostly absent from home and the tutor basically replaces him in the household. He hardly talks with his sons except for discussing their grades, and he complains to his wife about everything that does not go as planned in the house, but hardly acts upon it. Finally, Yamazaki's father can be deemed as the ultimate failure. He is useless at his job as his projects are constantly rejected, and still, the only form of interaction he has with his family is through the lens of the camera, detaching himself from any sort of emotion. Most importantly, he is a failure from a sexual and educational standpoint and in every other aspect of family life. As the last scene graphically represents, he fundamentally regresses to his childlike self, entrusting the reunification of the family unit to his wife. Through these three films, the father figure has become progressively weaker since the post-war era, completely losing touch with the family reality, becoming unable to communicate with them and ultimately delegating his duties to someone else.

When it comes to the representation of traditional family, Ozu is certainly the reference point, since his style has been copied, modified or parodied even in very different movies. In this regard, *The Family Game* can be evaluated as a parody of the home drama genre *à la* Ozu, where Morita works against stereotypical representations of traditional family targeting family meal scenes in particular. Morita updates the so-called 'Ozu's style' - fixed shot, low camera angle - to subvert its dynamics, showing a family with dissolved human bonds, which is "subtly different from the Japanese family Ozu described"

(Satō 1985, 60).⁴ On the other hand, if Ozu places the viewer among the members of the family by situating the camera at the *tatami* level, Miike overturns this approach in *Visitor Q*. The majority of the shots inside the house are far from the action, framing the kitchen from the hallway, or covering part of the frame with *shōji* or objects. Considering the hyper-realistic quality of the digital video, this gives a strong voyeuristic feeling to the images, drawing the viewer closer and assigning him the role of a Peeping Tom (Mes 2006, 214-15).

6 Conclusions

The three movies analysed feature several scenes of family meals playing a functional role in the development of the plot. As the dining table changes from a traditional to a longitudinal to a Western-styled one, a progressive detachment of the family from reality can be observed. The dining room, the safest place *par excellence*, gradually turns into an intimate war zone where the drama unfolding inside the house plays out. Consequently, food loses its original function to become a literal or metaphorical weapon. In Ozu's movie, produced when memories of war privations were still fresh, food retains its specific value. This is why it is the dish itself - with its own taste and ingredients - that becomes the key to solving the marriage crisis. *The Family Game* depicts a post-modern society instead, where food has turned into a signifier of characters and where it is used symbolically to cover the appearances of the middle-class family, until it is thrown to the ground, exposing the family's dysfunctions. Finally, *Visitor Q* does not need to employ food to create meaning, nor for its symbolical value, because contemporary society has lost both. Food is either part of an emptied daily gesture and a proper weapon. In the end, though, it is the mother's milk, the most fundamental nourishment, the source for a renewed awareness and the foundation of a new family unit.

⁴ In order to further deepen this relationship, Knee compares the shots of the industrial landscape in *The Family Game* to the famous Ozu's 'pillow shot' "clearly commenting on the physically and spiritually decayed and oppressive milieu of the modern family" (Knee 1991, 44).

